

# Visual Culture Art Education: Why, What and How

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## **Abstract**

Recognising that many art educators are increasingly using the term visual culture, rather than art, to describe their central concern, the author examines why this development is taking place, what visual culture might mean in the context of art education, and how pedagogy might be developed for visual culture. The paper draws on attempts by both art educators to redefine their field and others outside art education who are attempting to define visual culture as an emerging trans-disciplinary field in its own right.

## Introduction

Visual culture has become a hot, new, trans-disciplinary term, and, as Eisner notes, many art educators are, in turn, using it to describe their primary focus [1]. Instead of studying art, they claim to be studying visual culture. What they mean by visual culture, however, appears to vary and is not always entirely clear. Dobbs uses it to refer to “paintings, drawings, sculptures, architecture, films and so on” [2] while for most of those who use the term it is the “and so on” that is of special interest: the sites of contemporary cultural experience, television, the Internet, malls, video games, theme park rides, and so on. Freedman would study “human-made visual influences on our lives” [3], Tavin would study “popular” and “other images,” [4] while Smith-Shank [5] and Irwin [6] make visual culture refer to embodied visual memories. In this paper I will examine why visual culture has become a focus for such broad interests, the ways visual culture might be usefully conceived within art education, and how we might go about teaching it. In short, I will examine its rationale, its nature, and its pedagogy; the why, what and how of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE).

## Why Visual Culture?

Visual culture is a focal point for many, diverse concerns, but all have in common the recognition that today, more than at any time in history, we are living our everyday lives through visual imagery, what Jameson calls “a whole new culture of the image” [7]. As a description of our times, the culture of the image refers to two phenomena: a whole way of life, or ways of life, that is lived through imagery, and a particular kind of image culture. Evans and Hall see visual culture as one in which the use of images is a major defining characteristic [8]. They approvingly cite Alpers, who is usually credited with first using the term visual culture. Alpers writes, “a visual culture is a culture in which images, as distinguished from texts... [are] central to the representation (in the sense of the formulation of knowledge) of the

world” [9]. According to Mirzeoff ours is a visual culture because of our “tendency to picture or visualise experience”; for him, the visual appears both as global in scope and as part of ordinary, everyday life [10].

Ours is not only a visual culture, however, it is a visual culture with a particular character. Today’s particular image culture is characterised by depthless and self-referential images, more concerned with surface than substance, and more with play than significance [11]. These so-called postmodern images involve immediate, short and intense sensations. They are said to refer to each other rather than anything beyond other images; for example, magazine advertisements refer to television programs that refer to the cinema that refer to product brands that appear in magazine advertisements. A loop of reference is created that always turns back upon itself.

Both developments – a visual way of life and a culture of self-referential, depthless images – causes much angst among scholars, many of whom – including Jameson – deplore the ascendancy of images over words. They see in what they regard as the epistemological inadequacy of images a serious debasement of logical thought that threatens civil society [12]. Echoing Plato’s distrust of the image, they claim that nothing less than the future of democracy is at stake. For them, any image culture would be deeply concerning, but the postmodern culture of depthless images is deplorable. Not only is there now more imagery than ever before, not only is imagery tied more then ever to the economy and inserted into everyday life, but also imagery itself refers increasingly to itself rather than anything real. Postmodern images privilege form over content, signifiers over signification, surface play over narrative, spectacle over characterisation and plot. To those suspicious of visual culture, how can these characteristics be anything but dangerous?

Alternatively, others see today’s visual culture as offering people a new freedom of expression involving a knowing willingness to play at their own games of signification. People are thought

often to resist preferred meanings and to create their own [13]. People are also seen to revel in the pleasures offered by the formal characteristics of postmodern imagery, which have long historical precedence [14]. Thus, these critics argue that previous manifestations of what today are seen as contemporary, postmodern characteristics did not destroy civilisation as we know it, and, furthermore, gave pleasure and meaning to people's lives. The implication is that today's indulgence in postmodern characteristics is likely to be no more harmful.

Whichever perspective is held, no one appears to doubt the ascendancy of the image. If pictures have not come to replace words, then at least they have an unprecedented influence in what we know about the world, and how we think and feel it, beyond personal experience. According to Kress, this revolution in communications is forcing us to rethink "the semiotic landscape of Western 'developed' societies" [15]. This rethinking involves an attempt to theorise the visual as a form of communication that applies broadly across disciplines and social circumstances rather than just a specialised form of expression and aesthetic good taste. Visual culture represents an attempt to theorise the visual as part of a general theory of communications, not just a specialised activity. Conceptualising the visual in this way, away from art, is necessary given the proliferation of imagery as part of everyday life. It has also been made possible because the older, modernist distinction between high and popular art has eroded at both the levels of production and reception. During the modernist period, art educators focused on art imagery and thereby helped to maintain a clear separation between high art and popular art [16], but art educators are now acknowledging that the separation has broken down. Many artists draw upon popular references, and the small audiences who once showed an almost exclusive interest in high art are now more than likely as not to range freely between high art and popular art [17]. Whereas once high art provided for its minority public a frame of reference, a major point of which was to distinguish it from the popular

rabble, now, increasingly, a reflexive indulgence in popular pleasures is knowingly sought [18]. For most people a vast array of images provides both pleasures and reference points for everyday living. Thus, at both the levels of production and reception, the once powerful distinction between high art and popular art has broken down to be replaced by constant traffic between the two. Increasingly it makes more sense to think of high and popular culture, not as binary opposites, but, "a much more pluralist – or indeed 'multicultural' – model of culture" [19].

Developed economies are increasingly information driven or knowledge based, and the technologies of information are increasingly visual because for many purposes the visual turns out to be more efficient than older forms of written communication [20]. Indeed, it always was [21]. Kress and van Leeuwen [22] argue further that in homogeneous societies, literate communications are able to dominate because language does not lend itself to quite the plurality of meanings that images enjoy. Images come into their own, they argue, in heterogeneous societies such as our own. For a message to reach the whole population it has to be adaptable to a variety of cultural and ideological constructions, and images meet this demand. Because our's is a complex, diverse, even divided, society, images provide a sense of common culture which is altogether more diverse than a literacy-based one.

In a capitalist society the underlying purpose of communications is, of course, the continued expansion of consumer markets. Writing of the logic of capitalism, Jameson says, "Aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production" [23].

*The frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and purpose to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. [24]*

Herein lies the primary motive for a visual culture approach to art education. From recognition that consumer society and civil society are fundamentally at odds, with the former emphasizing individualism and the latter emphasising civic responsibility, comes the need to address how consumer markets employ images. As Chapman asks, "Who benefits most when artistic skills are widely deployed by a few, in ways not critically fathomed by the many?" [25]. Chapman argues that it is unwise to have students ill-equipped to know how and why they are seduced by images and a connection must be made between their study of imagery and everyday life. Similarly, Tavin argues that all forms of imagery should be studied as political texts for the purpose of developing critical citizenship in the cause of social reconstruction [26]. Duncum and Freedman agree that education in visual culture is underpinned by the impulse to maintain democratic processes and institutions [27, 28]. Students, they claim, need a space in which to become articulate about their involvement in visual culture. Since much of visual culture is politically reactionary and anti-social, its study is seen as a way to counter its negative effects and to offer the tools for transformative thinking and action.

### **What is Visual Culture?**

So far I have described visual culture as a description of our times, but what is visual culture when considered as a field of study with implication for art education? In one sense, the term visual culture is a reworking in contemporary terms of an earlier art education project described as visual literacy [29]. This project also sought to broaden the cannon to involve a wide range of imagery, but whereas visual literacy focused primarily on the image as a text, visual culture is concerned with the contexts of texts, the real, material conditions of image production, distribution and use. In this sense visual culture has more in common with another more recent project in critical pedagogy and art education called cultural literacy [30]. What is new is that visual culture has attracted

interest well beyond art education, and even critical pedagogy, to incorporate many disciplines, to the point where it now constitutes an emerging, trans-disciplinary field in its own right. There appear to be three main threads to this emerging field: a broadened cannon offering a very inclusive list of images and artefacts, a focus on how we look at images and artefacts and the conditions under which we look, the study of images within their context as part of social practice. I will deal with each thread in turn.

The most contentious is the first thread, the broadened cannon. The key issue is: Just how broad is the cannon to be? Mitchell was among the first to deal with this question where he succinctly summed up the tensions inherent in developing a working definition of visual culture by saying that we have both to reckon "with those parts of culture that lie outside the visual, and those parts of the visual that lie outside of culture" [31]. On the one hand visual culture is never wholly visual. The term is being used even while some recognize that it is inadequate to describe actual cultural experience. Today, more than ever, visual images are accompanied by other forms of representations that appeal to sensory modes other than sight [32]. As Chapman says in addressing theme park rides that rely on sound and kinaesthetic effects, "The culture of consumerism is not just visual" [33]. Television and the Internet, paradigmatically, combine imagery with human gesture and behaviour, music, sound, and written and spoken texts. For the New London Group of literacy educators this recognition has given rise to the term multiliteracies and an emphasis on multimedialities [34]. They are attempting to grasp what is new about the interactions of communicative forms that have traditionally been studied separately.

On the other hand, the field of visual culture is much broader than either the traditional focus of art education on art or even to a new art education focused on a much-expanded range of cultural sites. As the new *Journal of Visual Culture* makes clear, the area of visual culture includes many areas that are of a primarily scientific nature

and, at best, of marginal interest to art educators; for example, dreaming, blindness, the microscopic, cartographies, and topographies [35]. How are we to discriminate? Clearly, not everything visual could conceivably entertain art educators. A very wide range of imagery does not mean all imagery. For this reason the following two definitions from introductory texts on visual culture appear too broad.

*... those material artefacts, buildings and images, plus time-based media and performances, produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic, or ideological-political ends, and/or practical functions, and which address the senses of sight to a significant extent ... [36]*

*anything visual produced, interpreted or created by humans which has, or is given, functional, communicative and/or aesthetic intent. [37]*

My hesitation to accept these definitions lies in their inclusion of images whose sole purpose is functional. Brook helps clarify what is of interest to us, and what is not in his description of culture generally [38]. He dismisses the idea that we are interested in just any visual communications, in, for example, road markings because while they are meant to communicate they do not, at least as they are intended and are normally used, representative of anything. We are interested in what is "symbolic and communicative, and not just mechanically effective" [39]. He writes,

*Perhaps culture is second order communicative artifacture, in which communication floats on representation: the production of artifacts whose prime significance is to be about something else. So a drawing of a landscape might not be a cultural product if its purpose is, let's say, wholly and solely to guide us to the spot; but it becomes a cultural products as soon as it guides our thoughts about how, and in whose interest, the wilderness has become a garden. [40]*

Thus, if the word functional is dropped from the above definitions, I believe they can stand as definitions of visual culture that are of interest to art educators. When images act only in a functional way they are of interest to design educators but not art educators. As soon as they are viewed as representational, however, they become part of our purview. As already noted, observers of post-modern visual sites often complain that images today refer to nothing other than other visual images [41], but, crucial for the definition of what interests us, such images do represent even if it is only other images.

The second strand of visual culture as a field is what some call "visuality," the process of attributing meaning to what we see [42]. For Mitchell [43] attributing meaning involves the various ways we look, gaze, observe, survey and take visual pleasure. To this, Walker and Chapin add glancing and voyeurism [44]. Much of the debate among cultural observers involves the different kinds of looking that are characteristic of modern and postmodern cultural sites/sights: prolonged gazing at depthful images versus quickly glancing at depthless images. Visuality also involves the conditions under which we are allowed to look and under which conditions looking is forbidden or variously regulated. We attempt to prevent children from looking at images of violence and sex for example, and many religions have strict rules about whom, when, and where people can view sacred artefacts.

The third major strand of visual culture as a field of study is a concentration on images as social practice rather than just textual analysis. This, in turn, involves three dimensions: people's lived experience and their subjectivities, socio-economic issues, and the history of image production and reception. Williams' term for this enterprise, cultural materialism, captures the attempt to study images as part of the actual lived conditions in which they are produced and used [45]. The aim here is to understand images in terms of people's actual social relationships, as they attempt to make sense of the materials at

hand, often squaring impossible circles. This is culture as “sensible practice” [46]. The emphasis is on the wide range of meanings people make of images, as they not only accept preferred meanings but also resist and negotiate meaning. It involves understanding images in terms of how they are slipped into people’s daily rituals, rather than as self-contained texts. Meaning is not simply read off the images themselves.

Understanding images as social practice equally involves seeing images as part of power struggles between opposing social groups. Barnard, for example, sees visual culture as a tactic or strategy in the multiple ways in which power is exercised, which today is principally through the institutions of government and corporate capitalism [47]. A concentration on contemporary images, however, does not mean discounting the history of imagery. Indeed, an essential context for contemporary images is the history of images because contemporary images often have more to do with longstanding conventions of representation than they do to today’s realities. The history of visibility is not the same as the history of art however. Alpers distinguishes between visual culture history and art history [48]. She studied the way 17th century Dutch looked at the world – their scopical regime – through, among other means, their painting. Traditional art historians work in the opposite direction. They begin with the physical fact of the artworks and connect them to their cultural context. To illustrate further, Mirzeoff develops a very different history to that of art to understand contemporary science fiction films; it is a history that involves psychoanalytical interpretations of the gaze and fetishism he claims is inherent in 19th century photographs of African natives [49]. In analysing the aliens in such films he does not draw upon the history of the fantastic in art, but the tendency to make “other” people of different races.

In summary, visual culture involves three strands that are of interest to us as art educators: a greatly expanded but not all inclusive range of imagery; visibility; and the social contexts of imagery including histories of imagery.

## How Should Visual Culture be Studied?

What would VCAE be like? Space prevents more than an outline of principles, and it is important to signpost the provisional nature of these principles. As Kress says of the shift towards visual culture, “the implications... have not in any sense begun to be drawn out or assessed in any coherent, overt, full and consistent fashion” [50]. However, between two undergraduate texts on visual culture [51] and two anthologies of readings [52] there is some general consensus that the study of visual culture should follow the characteristics and content of the field as a whole. These include not only a much-broadened canon of artifacts but also the study of the institutions of production and distribution as well as the subjectivities of the viewing audience. It should be focused on the contexts of texts as much as the texts themselves, which means moving beyond semiotic readings to include both the phenomenology of people’s lived experiences – the meaning of imagery as part of people’s daily rituals – and institutionalised frameworks – the socio-economic and political functions of imagery. As Bolin writes, with reference to the associated field of material culture studies, questions need to be raised not only about the artifacts but “also about those who make, use, respond to, and preserve the artifact” [53]. This includes, as Bracey argues in relation to art, the institutional practices that help form the discourse of artefacts [54]. The institutional practices of visual culture are much more diverse than the artworld, however. A consideration of television, for example, should include the phenomenological experience of watching television but also who owns television networks, what else they own, how television operates financially, how programmers operate within government regulations, how programmers survey their audiences and how they deal with public criticism? Context also includes the social nature of reception. Buckingham and Sefton-Green demonstrate that adolescents make sense of imagery not as isolated individuals but as part of the social interaction of everyday chit chat [55]. Furthermore, a focus on

contemporary cultural sites would be contextualised by the critical perspective offered by comparing past and present visual culture. Thus, VCAE would go beyond visual texts to their various contexts – phenomenological, institutional, and historical.

Second, VCAE should be based on both the making and appraisal of images. While the impetus for studying visual culture is to develop critical consciousness and transformative action, VCAE would not abandon the traditional emphasis of art education on making imagery. Through making images students learn about visual culture as a practitioner; they acquire insight into the thinking process of the salaried and outsourced professionals who construct the images of corporate capitalism. I put the issue this way to make the point that, while making images in a visual culture curriculum remains important, it would not be the same as it exists in most art classes now. Professional institutionalized art today often involves an experimental investigation into the intricacies of the self and deeply private experience, and art in schools sometimes follows this model. Making images in VCAE, by contrast, would allow students to discover their own personal positions in relation to questions and issues specifically of cultural experience rather than anything in which students might be interested. It would involve issues such as the demography of audiences, media ownership, and the reproduction of society through stereotypical representation. It would assist students to understand the construction of their own subjectivities by visual culture and how they can reconstruct themselves through imagery. Thus image making and critique would continue to go hand in hand, the one supporting the other, where critique is used to focus making and making informs critique.

Third, a curriculum should be organised around central questions rather than reproducing the study of separate media [56]. We need to avoid the art school model of curriculum which consists of painting, sculpture, textiles and so on, and of media studies where the curriculum is similarly organised around television, video and

so forth. Instead, VCAE should arise from the questions it asks and the issues it seeks to address. VCAE should be based on the broad questions we ask ourselves as a society; how, for example, do we represent race, class, gender, and unequal power, as well as what we leave unrepresented and why? Questions should address both the imagery itself and their contexts, including ways of viewing. Examples of questions include those posed by Darley about new media:

*What, specifically, do concepts such as simulation, hyperrealism, pastiche, interaction, and immersion designate? How do they manifest themselves in cultural practices? What are the implications with respect to questions of aesthetics and spectatorship? What is the significance of the changes that are involved and how are we to make sense of them? [57]*

For example, how are we to understand the nuances of aesthetic experience between, say, shoot-em-up computer games, simulation rides, and blockbuster, eye-candy Hollywood films? How do we compare the slow languid investigation of a painting with the intensity of these postmodern experiences? If, as many claim, this is a typically postmodern phenomenon, what does this say about what is happening in society more broadly?

Fourth, we need to acknowledge that increasingly there are generational differences in the way cultural sites are experienced. To many people of a certain age the characteristics of contemporary culture sites mentioned above are an anathema. They see these sites as representing a dumbing down of cultural experience and a shift from natural and authentic experience to the artificial and inauthentic. These sites are said to deny or even to destroy our basic humanity. However, the history of new technologies is one of gradual naturalisation, so that we have to accept that what is unnatural for one generation, is not necessarily unnatural for another. What begins as an intrusion into daily life comes to be accepted as

the natural backdrop to daily activity. The Internet, still a confounding new technology for many, is for many youngsters quite ordinary because they have never lived without it. What for teachers remains perplexing, for youngsters forms the basis of their references for living [58].

For this reason – and this is the fifth point – visual culture should be taught through a dialogical pedagogy. Students have a lot to teach their teachers about new and emerging cultural sites. About the details of particular sites they often know more and learn faster than their teachers. Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) argue that in this context teaching needs to be conducted through dialogue between student knowledge and teacher knowledge. They describe how for decades media studies in Britain was taught through a transmission model whereby students learned how to pass tests by regurgitating the language of media studies but failed to transfer their lessons to their everyday lives. Thus we would want to avoid visual culture becoming just another academic subject, another form of cultural capital that served the distinction between the haves and the have-nots. It should not be seen as “learning to ‘talk posh’ – as our students would say – about things that everybody else just talks of normally” [58]. Rather, while validating students’ lived experience, education needs to reframe that experience in light of historical precedents and theory.

## Conclusion

I believe the reconceptualisation and reconstruction of art education is urgent. The image genie long ago escaped from the bottle of the artworld, and it has spread across the entire planet and permeated everywhere. While change to our practices will not be as rapid as the issue demand, we can do two things immediately. We can take up visual culture as an urgent matter to consider and we can begin the process of changing our practices, one contemporary cultural site at a time. By reading just one book on one contemporary cultural site and working out ways to deal with it in the classroom, the process begins.

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